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Father and Son at War

Story by Beth Reece

MICHAEL Novosel and his son Mike Jr. muse over Vietnam like old war buddies at a reunion. “We were always being shot at. We expected it,” Mike Jr. said of the rescue missions they flew together. America didn’t ask Mike Jr. to follow his father into war. He went willingly to flight school and later to Vietnam, where he volunteered as a “dustoff” pilot for the 82nd Medical Detachment.

The senior Novosel was the 82nd’s medical-evacuation commander, a seasoned trainer who’d coached pilots to fly in the line of fire. He welcomed his son into the unit with more pride than fear of the dangers ahead.

“I wasn’t overly concerned about the risk Mike was taking. I was confident in my ability to teach him the proper way of doing the work and surviving,” Novosel said.

But in March of 1970, Mike Jr.’s UH-1 helicopter was shot down. His dad heard the “Mayday” call from 15 minutes away. With assurance from the aircraft commander that his son’s crew had survived the crash and found shelter, Novosel completed his own mission before flying to their aid.

The younger Novosel returned the favor seven days later when his father was shot down. Just 19 at the time, Mike Jr. flew to his father’s rescue.

“Saving one another was no big deal,” Novosel said. “Saving lives was what we did.”

Honoring the Humble

The 82nd Med. Det. had 12 pilots and six aircraft. The aviators didn’t dream of reaping rewards, Novosel Sr. said. “None of us cared about getting medals. We were too fatigued to think about recognition.”

Public praise came to the elder Novosel after the war, in 1971, when he was presented the Medal of Honor for his actions in Kien Tuong Province. Novosel flew his Huey into a hail of enemy fire to save the lives of 29 soldiers on Oct. 2, 1969. The wounded men — without weapons or radios — avoided direct fire by crouching low in elephant grass as

Novosel hovered his aircraft close enough that crew members could reach down and pull them aboard.

“They were badly wounded,” Novosel said. “One man’s intestines were coming out, another had lost a hand, and another had been shot through the mouth.”

The risky vocation of a dustoff pilot may seem like a death wish. But it was a job of necessity. And perhaps one of humbleness.

“When I look back and realize that I flew 2,543 missions — each one dedicated to saving lives — I wonder what was more important about that one occasion than all the others,” Novosel said. “There were times when I’d saved 50 to 60 lives at a time. But this day I saved only 29. Only 29 — that clues you in on the thought process that goes along with doing this kind of work.”

Mike Jr. was still in training when his dad completed the mission that branded him a hero.

Throughout the war, Mike Jr. trusted that the techniques his father taught would keep him alive — tricks like flipping the tail of the aircraft into the direction of fire so bullets would have to travel through the body of the aircraft before entering the crew compartment.

“When we actually flew together, I didn’t doubt for a second that the outcome would be good. I also had a lot of faith in the aircraft commanders he put me with because they’d all ‘been there and done that,’” Mike Jr. said.

The Novosels are now retired warrant officers. Mike Jr. runs the Flight Line Café just outside Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. The café’s walls pay tribute to his dad and to aviation history through photographs and artifacts.

Mike Sr. divides his time between homes in Florida and Enterprise, Ala. His military adventures were published in 1999 in “Dustoff: The Memoirs of an Army Aviator.”

Their combat days are over, but father and son reminisce about a past that makes them comrades as well as kin.

“When two guys from Vietnam meet they call it a reunion, but Dad and I have that everyday,” Mike Jr. said. “My dad is an old friend from the war, an old combat buddy. How many fathers and sons share that?”

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